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Crown Point robotics team reaches national stage

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CROWN POINT -- When building a robot, every component counts; similarly, a strong team is made up of many different parts.

In less than two years, Crown Point High School's RoboDogs robotics team has built itself into a flourishing force of students who work by the motto "People who say it can't be done should not interrupt those who are doing it."

The team certainly has done a lot.

Last weekend, the RoboDogs participated in the F.I.R.S.T. (For the Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) National Championship in Atlanta and placed second in the Curie Division.

Crown Point qualified for the national competition after winning the West Michigan Regional last month at Grand Valley State University.

In addition to taking the regional first-place trophy, the RoboDogs won the Judge's Award for having the only robot that was exclusively designed, built and programmed by students.

"This robot is truly built by kids," said Patti Davis, a parent mentor. "They sit down and they design it on a piece of paper, and the mentors assist them and guide them."

The RoboDogs consist of more than 30 students, teachers and mentors. There are subgroups for design and engineering, animation, programming, and Web site design.

During the robot-building season, the team met daily before and after school. It had work sessions with engineer mentors on evenings and weekends.

The team's drivers, who lead in robot operation at competitions, are Andrew Wirtz, David Lubaway and Casey Paczkowski. Mentors include engineers, teachers and parents.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Indiana Workforce Development and the Crown Point Community Foundation are the club's largest sponsors.

"We have been overwhelmed by how many kids want to do it, (by) how many engineers -- and (by) the mentors, who have full-time jobs. They probably spend another working week with us," said Diane Noble, a teacher sponsor and mentor. "They've been so into this. They love it, they think of ideas, they contribute so much with the knowledge. They really work with the kids."

Mark Querry is a fellow teacher sponsor at CPHS.

F.I.R.S.T. was founded in 1989 by inventor, physicist and entrepreneur Dean Kamen to inspire young people's interest and participation in science and technology. F.I.R.S.T. competitions combine sports with science and feature matches in which the robots play games.

RoboDogs was formed in January 2007 after a meeting of interested students, parents, teachers and other sponsors.

"We started it, and it's just gone gangbusters since," Noble said.

In January this year, the team traveled to the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago to participate in the kickoff competition, entitled "Overdrive," where team members were informed of the season's set of rules.

The team spent the next six weeks conceptualizing, programming and building its robot, fondly called "Millennium Falcon" -- it "doesn't look pretty, but it is 'the fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy,'" Noble explained.

Sophomore Ani Chan, who works in the programming and Web site design subgroups, said she was astonished at the team's rapid successes.

"I'm shocked," she said. "But it's amazing. It's just a great thing to know that you're a part of this. In just two years, our little team has made it so far."

Sophomore Adam Caldwell, who has helped with building, electric and programming, said he has held a long-running interest in computers, which led him to joining RoboDogs.

"I thought, why not build a robot if the school was going to help us out with that?" he said. "So I thought it would be a way to get out there and get recognized for something good."

"Some of us aren't exactly athletes. We can't make a basketball team, but we can certainly make a robot and help out people for the future."

To learn more

For more information on the RoboDogs, visit www.cprobodogs2171.com.

To learn more about F.I.R.S.T. and its competitions, visit www.usfirst.org.

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